

## *Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition*



Sidonka Wadina (b. 1947) gained deep respect for Slovakian culture from her immigrant grandmother, Johanna Biksadski. As a girl growing up in Milwaukee, Sidonka learned many methods of egg decoration from Johanna, as they prepared eggs to display at the annual Holiday Folk Fair International, an ethnic festival held in Milwaukee every November. The next art form Sidonka learned from Johanna was straw plaiting, starting with a straw spiral lantern in 1964.

This is an ancient art with connections to harvest beliefs of fertility and protection. To learn other weaves, Sidonka took apart samples from Slovakia to determine their construction. “This would stir memories from Grandma and she would tell me about the customs and traditions associated with the pieces I was recreating.” Sidonka learned other designs from books and from studying with master straw weavers around the world. “I ‘invented’ new plaits when I would make a slight mistake in the number or direction of a weave.” Through her dedication to preserving the art, Sidonka has become a master weaver herself, with pieces she has designed and created in collections around the world.

Sidonka uses wheat, rye, oat, and barley straw in her projects. She has taught her apprentices such patterns as three-straw catfoot, six-straw ribbon, seven-straw herringbone, eight-straw whip, and nine-straw petal. Equally important is teaching the history of the art form and the customs associated with the harvest in Slovakia.

“My grandmother told me, ‘Sidonka, *you* are the future. It is up to *you* to pass this along or it will be lost forever.’” Sidonka has taken her grandmother’s charge to heart, teaching others through continued participation in Holiday Folk Fair for 62 years, writing for the Wisconsin Slovak Historical Society, and presenting at venues locally and internationally. Her apprentices, mother and daughter Germaine and Kate Bilicki of Richfield, also descendants of Johanna Biksadski, shared their learning at the Slovak Museum in Cudahy and Holiday Folk Fair. Kate was motivated to learn the art by a desire to delve more deeply into her Slovak heritage, and Germaine believes, “Traditions are the glue that keeps families together.”

*“I’m a perpetual student. I love discovery, learning, creating new things, and my real love now, is passing that information on to other people.” – Sidonka Wadina*